

Career education in primary school



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A career is a lifelong journey that starts much earlier than most people realise. From birth, we are surrounded by people and experiences that shape how we see the world. Inevitably, this influences our careers, shaping what we think we are good at, what we value and what we believe is possible.

In the past, young people received career support when they were on the brink of making the transition into post-secondary learning or work. As we learnt more about how career development works and what makes career education effective, it became clear that we should start earlier. In secondary schools, career education now begins long before the transition to work. This raises the question of whether it would be a good idea to start even earlier than this.

How early should career education start?

Many people feel that primary school is too early to start thinking about careers. Sometimes this is expressed as a desire to 'let children be children' as they will have plenty of time to worry about careers later in life. This concern ignores the reality that even if formal career education does not start until students are 11 or 12, they will already have learnt informally about careers.

Very young children often think about careers in a fantastical space not constrained by reality. The question 'What do you want to be?' is as likely to be answered with 'princess', 'dragon' or 'cat' as it is with more conventional occupations. Does it make sense to start formal career education with children this young?

Research that looks at children's development suggests that even while children are still in this fantasy phase, they are learning about the way work and society operate. From a very young age children begin to recognise that different occupations tend to be undertaken by either men or women and, as children get older, that different status is accorded to different professions. At exactly what age this happens is up for debate, but some of this happens before children start school. By the time they finish primary school, a lot of their ideas about careers are already in place.

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This kind of informal learning about the world leads young people to start doing what career theorist Linda Gottfredson (2002) describes as *circumscription* (ruling things out that are not for people like them) and *compromise* (aligning their aspirations with what seems to be possible). These processes are often accelerated by the informal learning that happens in family settings and the media, which shapes children's career thinking further.

In other words, children are learning about career even if they never discuss it at school. The value of involving schools is that we can ensure that career learning is less random, less partial, more equal, more accurate and more able to challenge young people's implicit stereotypes and assumptions. The purpose of primary career education is not to dissuade young people from fantastical aspirations or from using their imagination to dream big; rather it is about demonstrating new and exciting possibilities and preventing children from closing off possibilities.

Too early to choose

Career education in primary school is not about getting children to make decisions about what job, course or career they want to pursue. There is no need to make these choices while in primary school. Instead, the focus of career education in primary schools should be on expanding children's horizons and encouraging them to find out about as many careers as they can.

Through career education we are trying to help children avoid too much circumscription and compromise and to think beyond their immediate family and social network. As with all primary education, we want to introduce children to the world and give them the skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in it.

The *Australian blueprint for career development* (2010) sets out the main learning outcomes for career development programs. If we were to restate these for primary school, it would look something like this.

By the end of primary school, children should have:

- developed their self-image; considered what skills, knowledge and strengths they have; and developed their life skills
- explored the worlds of education and work and encountered a wide range of pathways, occupations and ways to be successful
- considered how their actions and behaviours in school and in the future will influence the way their career will develop.

Building careers into your school

Most primary schools are already doing lots of things that are designed to help children learn about themselves, the world around them and how to make an effective contribution. But schools often don't think about these activities as part of a career education program.

Career is a powerful idea as it links so many other concepts in the primary curriculum and in children's lives. Given this, there is value in moving from unintentional career learning, which happens in a haphazard way, to intentional career learning, which is based around a planned program. Norwegian researcher Siri Mordal and her colleagues (2020) describe this as convincing educators to 'put on their career glasses' and note that once they do, they will often see that they are already delivering career education and that it enhances the rest of the curriculum.

As you develop career education in your primary school, you should think about the following.

- **Find someone to lead it.** Career education can make a big difference to your school, but there is a lot to learn and coordinate. It works best when someone has the time and authority to develop the school's approach.
- **Make sure educators are comfortable.** Career education requires some knowledge and skills that may need to be developed. All primary school teachers (and other staff) can deliver it but they will need some training and support.
- **Embed it in the curriculum.** Don't relegate careers to the edges of the curriculum. It can interact with and enrich mathematics, languages and a host of other areas.
- **Look beyond school.** Involving a range of partners from the community will help deliver effective career education. Talk to parents, businesses, trade unions, educational institutions and community organisations about what they can add to your program.
- **Start early.** Career education can start in Foundation, but it is important to tailor all activities to specific year levels rather than having a 'one size fits all' approach.

What does it look like in practice?

Primary school educators are enormously creative and will be able to think of lots of things to do to help children learn about career. The table below sets out some of the most common approaches used in schools.

School-based activities

- Build career learning into the curriculum, e.g. using salary data in maths or talking about the career choices of book characters.
- Devote time to life skills development, e.g. decision-making or understanding money.
- Run simulations, role plays and games based around work and entrepreneurship.

Activities involving visitors

- Involve parents and alumni as speakers.
- Run events like mini career fairs with local employers.
- Bring in role models to talk to students.
- Engage with employers and staff as mentors and volunteers.

Exploring beyond the school

- Run a 'transition to secondary school' program: the students' first big career transition.
- Visit local employers, colleges and universities.
- Set homework projects for students to learn about careers in their families and communities.

Impacts

Building career education into your program offers the following benefits.

- **Increased engagement.** Thinking about the future and learning about the world is exciting. It will help children to see the relevance of what they are learning and to think about why it is important to work hard.
- **Increased equity of outcomes.** Career education has a positive impact on social mobility and social justice. It links disadvantaged young people to new resources and gives them inspiration.
- **Improved long-term outcomes.** Enhancing young people's knowledge and skills about career will set them on the right path. In the long run this will lead to better career outcomes for all the children at your school.
- **Better foundations for career support.** Career education in primary school lays the foundations for career education and guidance in secondary education and beyond.



The Adventures of You

This animated resource can be used with young students to explore executive function in decision-making. myfuture.edu.au/career-articles/details/making-good-career-decisions-the-adventures-of-you

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